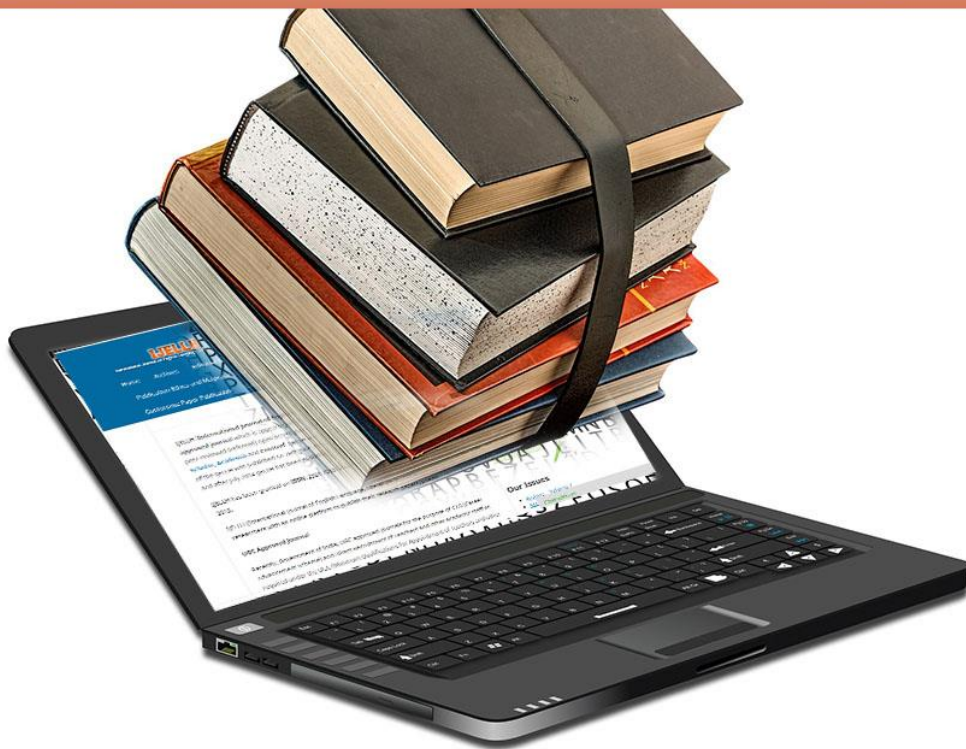


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### The lesser 'known' Lands: Exploring the Dimensions of Social Institutions in Jhumpa

Lahiri's *The Lowland*

#### Abstract

Institution of marriage, family and parenting form an integral part of society. They pave way for healthy interpersonal relationships that starts with favorable socio cultural conditions of the state and country. The past history, contemporary times and ideas of future developments are somehow dependent on these bases of social structure. But as the world simultaneously move on with global cultures and transitions, the educated, professional and progressive individuals find themselves maladjusted to it. The concept of independence and freedom has taken the centre stage of the new world ideas and people are suddenly facing an imbalance between their new found lifestyles and old established principles.

Since inception literature has traced different issues of subjectivities and explored fresh interpretations of individuals, communities, states and countries. But many a time we forget to draw our attention towards few unexplained haven of thoughts mirrored in literature that develops certain ideologies and indirectly influences people's mind. They lead the individual towards lesser known path that attract and fascinate the restless and daringly modern human beings. Although the subjective self breathe a personal air of ideas, the practical social institutions bind individuals towards certain duties that define their identity

and roles in the society. Hence in the present paper I would like to focus on these strong established parts of social institutions that indirectly control the characters of Jhumpa Lahiri's worldly acclaimed novel *The Lowland* (2013).

Keywords: Alienation, family, marriage, parenting

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“Wandering between two worlds one dead and other powerless to be born”

The line written long ago in the Victorian era by Mathew Arnold echoes the perpetual clash of two different worlds wherein the human mind anxiously searches a land/space/territory of its own. Jhumpa Lahiri narrates this predicament of her characters that are torn between two subjective spaces, one clustered with the memories of historical past and incomplete relationships and other wide open with new hopes and new beginnings. Earlier too the writer has narrated tales of people exploring new worlds and identities but in *The Lowland* she has portrayed an exclusive and elaborated world of memories and nostalgia that occupies a strong entity in the structure of the plot. Lahiri has vividly given details of the unconscious mind which is haunted by the past and inevitably controlling the present circumstances. Her unforgettable characters like Ashish Ganguly, Gogol, Ashima from *The Namesake* to Hema and Kaushik from *The Unaccustomed Earth* all perhaps lead us to a chain of thoughts that represent a continuous tug of war between the binary of inner world and practical world. Therefore, *The Lowland* (2013) seems to be about people traversing between a world that is lost and dead and a world incapable to offer a space of its own. In my present paper I would like to throw light on these lesser known lands and spaces that clashes with pragmatic world and its challenges. The paper therefore is an attempt to explore the inner

worlds of dreams, expectations, challenges and failures of the characters trapped in their dismal past and displaced present.

The novel paints a canvas of a diverse life from the humble and middle class background of Calcutta to a multicultural English lifestyle of Rhode Island. Although the backdrop of the novel present the lives of young and educated Bengali crowd coming in the wake of Naxalite movement, its main trajectory leads us towards the personal lives of three important characters Subhash, Gauri and Bela. The novel also voices the expectations and revelations of interpersonal relationships that the two brothers share. The harmony of differences portrayed by Udayan and Subhash encapsulates one of the vital themes of rebellion and acceptance in the novel. Gauri, Bela and Meghna are the links and legacies which continue to be the stream of thought that Lahiri tries to narrate through her characters. There are other multilayered topics in the novel which perhaps recount a modern tragic tale of love, longing, separation and reconciliation.

Although the novel deals with local as well as migrant characters but it is probably not focusing on the lives affected due to migration, instead the writer concentrates to widen the horizon of survival strategies with subjects that somewhere down the line affect the normal, regular life of the individuals. The characters in this novel are perhaps putting questions on the institution of family, marriage, parenting and eventually the existence of freedom in all these ideal streamlined social institutions. These familiar zones of interpersonal relationships gives a complete unfamiliar arena of thought and ideas that seems to bring revolution in the thought process of post modern people living in a globalized society. As Bharat Tondon opines, “the novel’s prose rests and mediates on the word “between” – a word which joins and divides, as Lahiri’s quietly suggestive style shares out its perspective and sympathies, in a searching exploration of likeness and unlikeness.”

Family, a known and a sensitive space for nurturing relationships is perhaps put to test when in one of her interviews taken by Cressida Lehson, Lahiri accepts that she in this novel particularly explores the family of three that makes an interesting 'triangle', "I often think the novel is, among other things, very much about what family is, what family means. Though a family can be any number of people, it has to consist of three people if you think of a family having at least two generations." The space that builds between the characters becomes the focal point of memories and nostalgia. The novel is therefore a unique and odd combination of three different individuals, expecting to establish different lands to survive; one who hopes to live a happy family life, another who carries a baggage of past incidences throughout and one who is ignorant about the two polar opposite facts of life and discovers a new meaning of life in broken relationships. Whatsoever attempt Subhash takes to renew his responsibilities towards his family, might not be in tune with Gauri or his parents but the character and his beliefs provide a reasonable ground to extend a hand of support to a young widow who is expecting a child in an upheaval of personal tragedies. Relating to Subhash and Gauri's marriage Lahiri reflects, "It was something that felt necessary, but something that wouldn't solve the problem. And I think a lot of life looks this way, where you do something, and you know that it's not quite the best thing to do but you do it anyway because there is something about it that feels necessary in the moment." This observation of Lahiri probably questions the institution of marriage as well that promises a safe haven to solve many troubles and practical issues of young men and women. Marriage according to Kierkegaard, as quoted by John Macquarrie in his book on *Existentialism*, is a "relationship that utterly transcends any temporary mood or infatuation. But whether this relationship can be realized must still remain in doubt at the time the commitment is made." (183). Perhaps a system of lifestyle is here a motive behind a wedlock, as Subhash, considering his times understands that a young widow is vulnerable, and she can succumb to the pressures of social custom and rituals that engulf

their lives. Though Subhash didn't exactly marry Gauri out of pity but his ideas echoed the principles of an educated, sensible and responsible person who believes in women's emancipation and rights. So he probably considers his duty to shield Udayan's wife from all social constraints and hence provides her an independent space to explore her freedom in Rhode Island. The family that Subhash wishes to build through the fragments of relations goes through various maladjustments, compromises and incompatibilities. Gauri who never expresses her wish and is not seen so vocal about her desires creates a void in their marital relationship. Absolutely no communication or conversation is explicitly narrated in the novel. The disparity in the marital life of Subhash and Gauri is only portrayed through different instances and gestures.

This disharmonious relationship inevitably disturbs the young mind of Bela. But its repercussions are seen when Bela while growing up realizes that she craves for motherly love and attention but can never get one. She witnesses the plight of a single parent through her own father Subhash who daily struggles to give a normal childhood to her. Hence an inevitable and interesting aspect of parenting arises in the novel when the portrayal of single parent comes into the central theme in the novel. Subhash, Gauri and Bela find themselves trapped with the troubles of parenting and grooming. Subhash and Gauri's marriage didn't end up in a healthy marital relationship and this affects Bela's upbringing. She unknowingly becomes a part of a strain and uncomfortable relation that goes into fragments one by one. Though Subhash readily accepts Gauri in his life and offers his love and care to both mother and child, but as the relationship moves ahead, Gauri starts showing signs of a rebel. She finds a new land of her thoughts and expressions in the education she begins to pursue and later a career that gives her an independent identity. She secludes herself into a new environment and deviates herself from all her duties of motherhood. She faces a disintegrated lifestyle and fails to conduct herself as a sensible mother.

Though she cared for Bela capably, though she kept her clean and combed and fed, she seemed distracted. Rarely did Subhash see her smiling when she looked into Bela's face. Rarely did he see Gauri kissing Bela spontaneously. Instead, from the beginning, it was as if she'd reversed their roles, as if Bela were a relative's child and not her own. (159)

An independent land of her own was probably what Gauri wanted to explore when she lands in a different country. Gauri couldn't resist the opportunities of the new found life she gets in Rhode Island. In the journey to explore her own potentials in Rhode Island she lost her path to be the caring and comforting mother. She is a mother of a new born baby but her child never gives her any sense of fulfillment that she has lost with the death of Udayan. She is not portrayed as a compassionate, warm mother to her baby rather a peculiar strangeness is seen in mother daughter relationship. Gauri unknowingly and yet sometimes deliberately shifted all responsibilities of parenting and grooming to Subhash. In the letter written to him Gauri reconfirms, "You are her father. As you pointed out long ago, and I have long come to accept, you have proven yourself to be a better parent than I." (211). Ralph Harper in his book titled *The Existential Experience* opines, "An individual can choose his own character and way of life but he cannot choose the necessity to choose; that is imposed on him as a human being and that is his human nature." (26)

Consequently, the novel explores the image of a mother through the character of Gauri. Though Lahiri portrays a woman longing to search an identity of her own but her insensitivities related to her motherhood is a major setback from the beginning. From centuries socially, historically and literally motherhood has been considered a virtue and an

achievement. The word 'mother' encapsulates the whole idea of love, compassion, care, responsibility and completeness. Ann Taylor in her book *My Mother* defines the role beautifully, "Who ran to help me when I fell, And would some pretty story tell, Or kiss the place to make it well? My Mother." (133) But the way Gauri leaves everything to Subhash and moves to a different place to pursue her much awaited career hints towards a mindset in the making that later on is probably seen in the attitude and temperament of Bela too. No matter how career oriented, independent and assertive a woman is, the image of motherhood and its associated feeling add a lot of value and importance to the personality of a woman. This is also probably expected from the character of Gauri which remains a complex one to the readers as she disassociates and isolates herself from all these sensibilities. Perhaps Udayan's untimely shocking death and her hasty marriage with Subhash brings a lot of disintegration and chaos in her mind. Gauri fails to balance two different worlds and finally chooses something that she considers will liberate her. Motherhood and its inherent ideas are therefore a significant chapter in Gauri's life that turns the course of events in the novel. In an interview, Lahiri points out, "Gauri had been through enough. I didn't want to resolve anything for her, but I wanted it as a half –open door of perhaps."

Subhash witnesses the change and unquestioningly stands beside Gauri's independent goals. Notwithstanding the fact that Bela is Udayan's daughter and she shows the signs of Udayan's rebellious and assertive nature, she also inherits her mother's independent and brave fascinations to lead life on her own terms. Subhash at this juncture turns out to be the most dependable, responsible and sensible parent to Bela. He all along maintains a reputation of a dignified and caring father to her. Through his sincere concern and love for Bela he righteously proves himself to be the better parent. Although Subhash right from the beginning takes up all the duties faithfully as a doting father, he also is troubled by the thought that he is not Bela's biological father. He is constantly reminded of the dissatisfaction



that his parents expressed when he marries Gauri. His mother's concerns haunt him, "She's Udayan's wife, she'll never love you, his mother had told him, attempting to dissuade him." (160) In spite of all the grief, worries and insecurities Subhash emerges out to be the most admirable person for Bela. It is she who understands his worth and contribution in the welfare of the family. Erich Fromm in his book titled *Fear of Freedom* explores the emergence of an individual and writes

There is only one possible, productive solution for the relationship of individualized man with the world: his active solidarity with all men and his spontaneous activity, love and work, which unite him again with the world, not by primary ties but as a free and independent individual. (29)

Subhash emerges as an independent person free from all fears in the end. His characterization reminds us probably about the idea of an anti hero who without showing the expected heroic qualities derive power and strength through his mistakes and insecurities. The flaw in his character brings tension, conflict and eventually reconciliation in the novel. He is passive but responsible, indecisive at times but compassionate and has a sense of fear along with the courage to face consequences. He represents the common, ordinary man falling in series of dilemma and predicaments. From the beginning he had been compared with his brother Udayan. As Siddharth Deb comments "The personal is political", the relation between the brothers makes the plot and its conflict more politically personal. The socio political air of Calcutta and its consequences establish a new land of ideologies. Subhash comes under its wake but was reluctant to walk towards the new adventurous path. He was not even confident to leave India initially and settle in a different country as his brother

upheld his Marxists ideals in front of him and questions his duties towards his country. He was guilt ridden for a while for thinking practically and professionally in his life. But eventually the novel narrates the tales of patience, compassion, education and wisdom of Subhash that is put to series of tests and struggles.

Even after being a sensible and adorable father to Bela, he stays in constant fear of losing all if Udayan's memories are revived, as in spite of showing concern and care towards Gauri, memories of Udayan permanently built a wall between the two. However Subhash in course of time strengthened his bond of relationship with Bela and tries to provide all that she needs from a supportive father. This was also the reason that Bela sees an inspiring strong single parent in Subhash. She finds confidence to give birth to a baby without entering in wedlock. Subhash though gently warns Bela saying, "It's not so easy, Bela, bringing up a child alone." (263) But she asserts, "You did it. Lots of people do." (263) This was an inevitable and odd legacy that Bela "inherited" (262) after witnessing a "collided and dispersed" (262) status of Subhash and Gauri's relationship. Lahiri at this major turning point of her novel declares, "They were a family of solitaires." (262)

The novel here captivatingly narrates a tale of Subash who is forced to be a single parent and Bela who chose to be single parent. Lahiri vividly gives details of both kinds of struggle and portrays the sense of freedom and independence of these characters as they face the challenges of practical world. The ideologies behind family, relationships and parenting are being questioned. The family from the beginning confronts many setbacks and grief that nowhere seems to end with marriage and even migration. The legacy of failed marriage and relationship continues in the next generation. Bela after witnessing the strain relationship of Subhash and Gauri, decides to remain unmarried and liberates herself from the necessity of getting married. She does what she considers best for her life. Very confidently becomes a single mother and flags off a beautiful mother-daughter relationship that she herself missed.

Meghna comes into a family which probably Lahiri hints to be a complete one without any broken relationships. So when Gauri after many years visits Bela to find about her well being becomes glad to see her grand-daughter Meghna. Gauri's visit sums up and provides a ground of reconciliation to forget and forgive the inner storm under whose affect Subhash and Bela found themselves displaced and lost. Eventually Bela doesn't wish to repeat history she frees herself from the memories of a motherless childhood and gives space to all the relationships that couldn't breathe independently. Sense of forgiveness, confidence along with peace and stability all comes at an end with the letter that Bela writes to her mother Gauri. All revelations about her biological father Udayan and her independent ideology meet a solution, rather a conclusion.

My daughter will know the truth about you. Nothing more, nothing less  
 if, then, she still wants to know you, and to have a relationship with you,  
 I 'm willing to facilitate that. This is about her,  
 not about me. You've already taught me not to need you, and  
 I don't need to know more about Udayan. But may be, when  
 Meghna is older, when she and I are both ready, we can try to  
 meet again. (324-325)

As we see the development of the underlying themes of marriage, family and parenting in the novel, we can also witness the change and transformation of the characters through these various interpersonal clashes and inner conflicts. These conflicts and clashes have further facilitated a perpetual presence of the subject of alienation. It works like a strong entity in the novel. The omni potent and omni present Udayan is also the catalyst in bringing the alienation theme in the novel. He seems to be the creator of a fragmented family and also becomes a reason of two broken relationships, Gauri and Subhash and Gauri and Bela. Subhash feels alienated and abandoned when Gauri leaves the family circle. Gauri

deliberately isolates and alienates herself as she is maladjusted with the familial environment. Bela's character though becomes a victim of alienation due to the liberated and independent decisions of Gauri but she has not alienated herself from the challenges of practical life, rather she accepts everything and establishes herself as a strong and free individual. Frank Johnson as quoted by D.K.Pabby comes very close to the definition of alienation. He pointed out:

Alienation being related to the feeling of deprivation, frustration, anguish, agony, loss of identity, disillusionment etc which may, however have a positive impact in the form of affirmation, assimilation, catharsis, realization and acceptability of the reality of the situation. (15)

The novel simultaneously stands unique and relatable. It is unique in its treatment and style. The continuous leaps from past to present sets the narration firm and intense. The situations, its history and its consequences form a stream of thought. The themes discussed in this paper are beautifully woven in the plot of the novel. Probably the novel paints a microcosm of life in general and memories in particular. Right from the beginning till the end the writer perhaps poured all that man faces throughout the journey of life and they are the memories of the past with the challenges of the present and expectations of the future. Udayan, Subhash, Gauri and Bela took us towards their unknown lands of inner realities. The subjects of anguish, forlornness, fears and predicaments confront us to the affects of the unconscious mind that controls life and its decisions. The daring, unbothered selfless Udayan and his rebellious nature result into a bleak turn of events for Gauri. The caring, introvert and timid Subhash tries to set a balance and hopes for a better future of the family. But as Lahiri changes the land and place of plot, she transforms the characters as well. Gauri's

dissatisfaction and disillusionment with her husband, child and career finally takes her nowhere. An unresolved dimension of her inner conflict brings her face to face with her own alter ego Bela, later in the novel. All of the above perspectives lead us perhaps to a fact that men and women are trapped in roles and responsibilities but their inner self is always free and unrestricted from the norms of social structures. We witness the transformation and maladjustments and consequently alter rules to live and face the new world and its undefined territories.

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